

AN ATTEMPT AT
EXHAUSTING A PLACE
IN PARIS

GEORGES PEREC

TRANSLATED BY MARC LOWENTHAL

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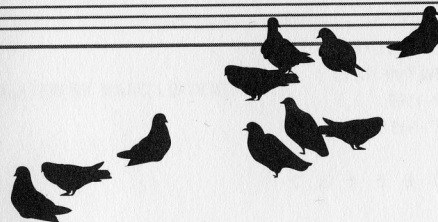
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There are many things in place Saint-Sulpice; for instance: a district council building, a financial building, a police station, three cafés, one of which sells tobacco and stamps, a movie theater, a church on which Le Vau, Gittard, Oppenord, Servandoni, and Chalgrin have all worked, and which is dedicated to a chaplain of Clotaire II, who was bishop of Bourges from 624 to 644 and whom we celebrate on 17 January, a publisher, a funeral parlor, a travel agency, a bus stop, a tailor, a hotel, a fountain decorated with the statues of four great Christian orators (Bossuet, Fénelon, Fléchier, and Massillon), a newsstand, a seller of pious objects, a parking lot, a beauty parlor, and many other things as well.

A great number, if not the majority, of these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, or registered. My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds.

DAY

1

1

DATE: 18 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 10:30 AM

LOCATION: TABAC SAINT-SULPICE

WEATHER: DRY COLD. GRAY SKY. SOME SUNNY SPELLS.

Outline of an inventory of some strictly visible things:

- Letters of the alphabet, words: “KLM” (on the breast pocket of someone walking by), an uppercase “P” which stands for “parking”; “Hôtel Récamier,” “St-Raphaël,” “l’épargne à la dérive [Savings adrift],” “Taxis tête de station [Taxi stand],” “Rue du Vieux-Colombier,” “Brasserie-bar La Fontaine Saint-Sulpice,” “P ELF,” “Parc Saint-Sulpice.”
- Conventional symbols: arrows, under the “P” of the parking lot signs, one of them pointing slightly toward the ground, the other in the direction of rue Bonaparte (Luxembourg side), at least four one-way signs (a fifth one reflected in one of the café mirrors).
- Numbers: 86 (on the front of a bus on the 86 line, above which it says its destination: Saint-Germain-des-Prés), 1 (plaque of no. 1 on rue du Vieux-Colombier), 6 (on the square, indicating that we are in the sixth arrondissement of Paris).
- Fleeting slogans: “De l’autobus, je regarde Paris [From the bus, I look at Paris]”
- Ground: packed gravel and sand.

- Stone: the curbs, a fountain, a church, buildings...
- Asphalt
- Trees (leafy, many yellowing)
- A rather big chunk of sky (maybe one-sixth of my field of vision)
- A cloud of pigeons that suddenly swoops down on the central plaza, between the church and fountain
- Vehicles (their inventory remains to be made)
- Human beings
- Some sort of basset hound
- Bread (baguette)
- Lettuce (curly endive?) partially emerging from a shopping bag

Trajectories

- The 96 goes to Montparnasse station
- The 84 goes to Porte de Champerret
- The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF
- The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

Demand the real thing, Roquefort Société in its green oval

There's no water gushing from the fountain. Some pigeons are sitting on the edge of one of its basins. There are benches on the plaza, double benches with a single headboard. From where I'm sitting I can

count six of them. Four are empty. Three down-and-outs making classic gestures (drinking red wine from a bottle) on the sixth.

- The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette
- The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près
- Cleaning is good, not making a mess is better
- A German bus
- A Brinks truck
- The 87 goes to Champ-de-Mars
- The 84 goes to Porte Champerret

Colors

- red (Fiat, dress, St-Raphaël, one-ways)
- blue bag
- green shoes
- green raincoat
- blue taxi
- blue 2CV
- The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF
- green Mehari
- The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près
- Dannon: Yogurts and desserts
- Demand the real thing, Roquefort Société in its green oval

Most people are using at least one hand: they're holding a bag, a briefcase, a shopping bag, a cane, a leash with a dog at the end, a child's hand

A truck delivers beer in metal casks (Kanterbraü, beer of Maître Kanter)

The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

A double-decker "Cityrama" bus

A blue Mercedes truck

A brown Printemps Brummell truck

The 84 goes to Porte de Champerret

The 87 goes to Champ-de-Mars

The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF

The 96 goes to Gare Montparnasse

Darty Real

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

Casimir master caterer. Charpentier Transport.

Berth France S.A.R.L.

Le Goff draft beer

The 96 goes to Gare Montparnasse

Driving school

Coming from rue du Vieux-Colombier, an 84 turns onto rue Bonaparte (toward Luxembourg)

Walon Moving

Fernand Carrascossa Moving

Wholesale potatoes

From a tourist bus, a Japanese woman seems to be taking my photograph.

An old man with his half-baguette, a lady with a cake-box in the shape of a little pyramid

The 86 goes to Saint-Mandé (it doesn't turn onto rue Bonaparte, but takes rue du Vieux-Colombier)

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

The 87 goes to Champ-de-Mars

The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF

Coming from rue du Vieux-Colombier, an 84 turns onto rue Bonaparte (toward Luxembourg)

A bus, empty.

Some Japanese, in another bus

The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

Braun art reproductions

Lull (lassitude?)

Pause.

DATE: 18 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 12:40 PM

LOCATION: CAFÉ DE LA MAIRIE

tens, hundreds of simultaneous actions, micro-events, each one of which necessitates postures, movements, specific expenditures of energy:

conversations between two people, conversations between three people, conversations between several people: the movement of lips, gestures, gesticulations

means of locomotion: walking, two-wheeled vehicles (with and without motor), automobiles (private cars, company cars, rented cars, driving school cars), commercial vehicles, public services, public transport, tourist buses

means of carrying (by hand, under the arm, on the back)

means of traction (shopping bag on wheels)

degrees of determination or motivation: waiting, sauntering, dawdling, wandering, going, running toward, rushing (toward a free taxi, for instance), seeking, idling about, hesitating, walking with determination

body positions:

seated (in buses, in cars, in cafés, on benches)

standing (near bus stops, before a shop window (Laffont, funeral parlor), next to a taxi (paying it))

Three people are waiting near the taxi stand. There are two taxis, their drivers aren't there (hooded taxis)

All the pigeons have taken refuge on the gutter of the district council building.

A 96 passes by. An 87 passes by. An 86 passes by. A 70 passes by. A "Grenelle Interlinge" truck passes by. Lull. There is no one at the bus stop.

A 63 passes by. A 96 passes by.

A young woman is sitting on a bench, facing "La demeure" tapestry gallery; she is smoking a cigarette.

There are three mopeds parked on the sidewalk in front of the café

An 86 passes by. A 70 passes by.

Some cars dive into the parking lot

A 63 passes by. An 87 passes by.

It is five after one. A woman is running across the square in front of the church.

A deliveryman in a white smock comes out of his van parked in front of the café des glaces (food) where he is making a delivery on rue des Canettes.

A woman is holding a baguette in her hand

A 70 passes by

(it is only by chance that I can see 84s pass by at the other end from where I'm sitting)

Automobiles follow obviously privileged traffic routes (one-way, from left to right from where I am); it's much less noticeable with pedestrians: it would seem that most are going to rue des Canettes or coming from it.

A 96 passes by.

An 86 passes by. An 87 passes by. A 63 passes by
People stumble. Micro-accidents.

A 96 passes by. A 70 passes by.

It is twenty after one.

Return (uncertain) of previously seen individuals:
a young boy in a navy blue peacoat holding a plastic
bag in his hand passes by the café again

An 86 passes by. An 86 passes by. A 63 passes by.

The café is full

On the plaza a child is taking his dog for a run (looks
like Snowy)

Right by the café, at the foot of the window and at three
different spots, a fairly young man draws a sort of "V"
on the sidewalk with chalk, with a kind of question
mark inside it (land art?)

A 63 passes by

Six sewer workers (hard hats and high boots) take rue
des Canettes.

Two free taxis at the taxi stand

An 87 passes by

A blind man coming from rue des Canettes passes by
in front of the café; he's a young man, with a rather
confident way of walking.

An 86 passes by

Two men with pipes and black satchels

A man with a black satchel and no pipe

A woman in a wool jacket, smiling

A 96

Another 96

(high heels: bent ankles)

An apple-green 2CV

A 63

A 70

It is 1:35 PM. Groups, in gusts. A 63. The apple-green
2CV is now parked almost at the corner of rue Férou,
on the other side of the square. A 70. An 87. An 86.

Three taxis at the taxi stand. A 96. A 63. A bike courier.
Deliverymen delivering beverages. An 86. A little girl
with a schoolbag on her shoulders.

Wholesale potatoes. A lady taking three children to
school (two of them have long red hats with pom-poms)

There is an undertaker's van in front of the church.

A 96 goes by.

People are gathering in front of the church (for a funeral
procession?)

An 87. A 70. A 63.

Rue Bonaparte, a cement mixer, orange.

A basset hound. A man with a bow tie. An 86.

The wind is making the leaves on the trees move.

A 70.

It is one fifty.

SNCF parcels service.

The people from the funeral procession have entered
the church

Passage of a driving-school car, a 96, a 63, a florist's van,
blue, which parks next to the undertaker's van and from
which a funeral wreath is taken.

In splendid unity, the pigeons go round the square and
return to settle on the district council building's gutter.

There are five taxis at the taxi stand.

An 87 goes by, a 63 goes by.

The Saint-Sulpice bell begins to ring (probably funeral
chimes)

Three children taken to school. Another apple-green
2CV.

Again the pigeons go round the square

A 96 passes by, stops before the bus stop (Saint-Sulpice
section); off it steps Geneviève Serreau, who takes
rue des Canettes; I get her attention by knocking on the
windowpane, and she comes over to say hello.

A 70 passes by.

The funeral chimes stop.

A young girl is eating half a *palmier*.

A man with a pipe and black satchel.

A 70 passes by

A 63 passes by

It is five after two.

An 87 passes by.

People, in waves, still, continually

A priest returning from a trip (there is an airline label
hanging from his satchel).

A child slides a toy car along the windowpane of the café
(slight noise)

A man stops for a moment to say hello to the big dog
of the café, peacefully stretched out in front of the door

An 86 passes by

A 63 passes by

A woman passes by. On her bag is written "Gudule"

Almost in front of the café, a man squats down to
rummage through his briefcase

An 86 passes by

A young man passes by; he is carrying a large portfolio

There are only two mopeds still parked on the sidewalk
in front of the café now: I didn't see the third one leave
(it was a velosolex) (*Obvious limits to such an undertaking:
even when my only goal is just to observe, I don't see
what takes place a few meters from me: I don't notice,
for example, that cars are parking*)

A man passes by: he is pulling a handcart, red.

A 70 passes by.

A man looks at the Laffont window

In front of "La Demeure" a woman is waiting, standing
near a bench

In the middle of the street, a man is on the lookout for taxi (there are no more taxis at the taxi stand)

An 86 passes by. A 96 passes by. A "Tony-gencyl" deliveryman passes by.

Malissard Dubernay rapid transit passes by.

Again the pigeons go round the square. What triggers off this unified movement? It doesn't seem linked to any exterior stimulus (explosion, detonation, change in light, rain, etc.) nor to any particular motivation; it seems completely gratuitous: the birds suddenly take flight, go round the square and return to settle on the district council building's gutter.

It is two twenty.

A 96. Elegant women. A lost Japanese man, then another, smiling, ask a passerby for directions. He points them to rue des Canettes and they immediately head for it.

Passage of a 63, an 87, and a "Dunod éditeur" van.

Near the bus stop, a woman puts stamps on three letters and drops them into a mailbox.

Small poodle-type dog.

A sort of double of Peter Sellers, with a very pleased expression on his face, walks by the café. Then a woman with two very young children. Then a group of 14 women coming from rue des Canettes.

I have the impression that the square is almost empty (but there are at least twenty human beings in my line of sight).

A 63.

A postal van.

A child with a dog

A man with a newspaper

A man with a large "A" on his sweater

A "Que sais-je?" truck: "La collection 'Que sais-je' a réponse à tout [The 'Que sais-je' collection has an answer for everything]"

A spaniel?

A 70

A 96

Funeral wreaths are being brought out of the church.

It is two thirty.

A 63, an 87, an 86, another 86, and a 96 go by.

An old woman shades her eyes with her hand to make out the number of the bus that's coming (I can infer from her disappointed look that she's waiting for the 70)

They're bringing out the casket. The funeral chimes start ringing again.

The hearse leaves, followed by a 204 and a green Mehari.

An 87

A 63

The funeral chimes stop

A 96

It is a quarter after three.

Pause.